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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MILAN 000214

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SUBJECT: DAL MOLIN UPDATE: VICENZA COMMUNITY MOSTLY
SUPPORTIVE, BUT CONCERNS LINGER

Classified By: CG Carol Perez for Reasons 1.4 (b, d)

¶1. (C) Summary: In meetings with local Vicenza politicians across the political spectrum, the general consensus was that the ugliest period of contentious and politically charged opposition to the U.S. army's Dal Molin base construction has passed. Their assessment is that most community residents are either favorable or indifferent to the project. That said, even among supporters there are some lingering concerns about the impact of Dal Molin -- above all the fear of increased traffic disrupting the center of town in the absence of a "tangenziale" ring road to connect the two bases. Additionally, residents are concerned about the prospect of additional American military personnel in their midst given the existing military's perceived isolation from the greater Vicenza community. The tangenziale is something that the Italian government must resolve, and it is certainly in our interest they do so. The need for new collaboration with Vicentini civil society is also a point well taken. We'll work with our good partners in the city and region to promote it. End Summary.

Dal Molin: No Longer a Political Hot Potato

¶2. (SBU) In October 27 meetings in Vicenza, local politicians from the Democratic Party (PD), Popolo della Liberta (PDL), and Northern League (LN) parties described general support of, or resignation to, the army's Dal Molin base construction project among community residents. The army commenced early this year construction of the new base to accommodate more than 1,500 new soldiers coming from Germany to Vicenza in order to consolidate by 2012 the 173rd BCT in one location. According to these politicians, the days of rabid and vocal opposition to the base expansion project have safely passed, and the anti-base Mayor Variati's August 2009 acknowledgement that the project was going forward took wind out of the remaining opponents' sails. A prominent local journalist similarly assessed that Dal Molin is no longer an issue in the local political discourse, and that most people at this point are indifferent (if they were not already). The most positive outlook on the base expansion came from the Lega Nord, whose local party secretary said that a majority of young people are actually favorable to the base and hold a positive view of Americans.

The Importance of a Road

¶3. (SBU) Although most of the politically charged and ideological opposition to the project has subsided -- or at least quieted -- there is still significant concern across the political spectrum about logistical problems the Dal Molin project will almost certainly create. Specifically, every politician highlighted worries about the increase of

traffic and congestion in Vicenza's city center as a result of the new army base, which is located several kilometers across town from the existing Caserma Ederle base. Historically, the traffic issue has been a major point of contention for those opposing the base, and as a result of the town's insistence, the Italian central government approved, and agreed in principle to fund, a ring road ("tangenziale") around the city to connect the two bases and prevent additional army-related traffic from the narrow roads through the urban center. However, the project has not advanced beyond a feasibility study carried out more than a year ago.

¶4. (SBU) In earlier discussions with LN-affiliated provincial authorities (the proposed tangenziale route would pass through land owned by both the city and the province) we heard complaints over the slow pace of the project. The provincial President, conveniently also an executive in a local highway-construction and operation company, said that the whole thing could be done in three years if the political will in Rome and Vicenza existed. He noted that pressure on local authorities to get the route agreed to and on Rome authorities to get necessary permits for construction were all that would be required. Though the tangenziale would cost around 500 mln euro, he estimated, budgetary constraints should not come into play. The President told us he thought the project could be privately financed with repayment in 20 years via a shadow toll system that would charge local drivers a users surcharge. Although all the politicians we've spoken with acknowledge that delays in the construction of the tangenziale were the fault of the Italian central

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government, not the Americans, they feared that continued delays in the construction of the tangenziale could reinvigorate the mostly dormant opposition to the base, and breed ill-will toward the Dal Molin project and the American government in general.

More Integration is Key

¶5. (SBU) In addition to the tangenziale issue, perceived poor integration of the army community was cited by politicians as a problem hindering U.S.-Vicenza relations. They noted that the larger Vicenza community has virtually no interaction with the American military personnel who live in their midst (even though the vast majority of troops live off base). Every politician, in one way or another, underscored the desire for more interaction and exchange between the American troops and the rest of the community. Several politicians bemoaned the fact that the only interaction between Vicenza residents and the base over the past 50 years has been the annual 4th of July party, when the base is opened to the public, and on Friday and Saturday nights when soldiers come to town to eat and drink. The politicians had a number of ideas for how to strengthen ties between the American military community and the town of Vicenza, including specific suggestions for cultural and educational exchanges, study abroad and other university programs, and shared activities (like Boy Scouts) for Italian and American children as means for engaging the local community.

Comment: Time for a New Strategy

¶6. (C) The reduction in violent opposition, and the tactical retreat of Mayor Variati, give us some breathing space to develop a strategy to ensure Dal Molin is completed and the 173rd consolidated in 2012 with a minimum of friction. We agree that short-term progress on the tangenziale issue is essential to this end and something on which we need to work with our Italian partners -- both on the federal and local levels. Though the money and decision making must come from the Italians, the traffic that will boil Vicentini blood will be U.S. military. The claims of poor integration are also a point well taken. With the message that "Dal Molin will happen, so let's move on," we're re-approaching Vicenza civil

society leaders to find a way to ensure the USG has strong ties in Vicenza and a positive image that goes beyond military relationships. Despite lingering bad feelings in city hall, we have many local partners in this effort who have the same goal, including officials at the provincial and regional levels. We don't expect that regional elections in the Veneto next March will change this atmosphere of cooperation.

PEREZ